

Combating Bigotry with Beats

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Dating back 500 years, Cuba has been a country filled with life and culture, yet its people have also struggled for their freedom and right to expression. Historically, music has been a way for Cubans to express their identity as well as their dissatisfaction at social and political situations. More recently, hip hop has played a vital role in the cultural revolution occurring in Cuba from the 1990s to the present, and Cuban artists are laboring against oppression to protest racism and other forms of oppression that are still relevant in Cuban society. My thesis is a playlist of hip hop songs by different Cuban artists that address issues such as racism, racial and cultural identity, women's rights, gender identity, freedom of speech, and the general oppression present in Cuba.

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Process Analysis

My thesis is a playlist of hip hop music by Cuban artists from the 1990s to the present that addresses the social and political issues of Cuba. The issues include topics such as racism, racial and cultural identity, women's rights, gender identity, freedom of speech, and the general oppression that Cubans suffer under the Castro Regime. For the last few decades, Cuba has been experiencing a cultural revolution that has been, in a large part, fueled by the artists of Cuba—musicians, photographers, graffiti artists, writers, etc. My thesis has been a journey with twists and turns dating back a year and a half. It's helpful to look back now at how my original idea has transformed through the challenges of creating depth in my project, while facing obstacles regarding access and distribution of Cuban music.

A variety of factors went into my choosing to study this topic more in depth as my thesis project. The main influences on my direction include my Spanish major, my Communication Studies major, and a culture course that I took in the Spanish department. First, one of the largest reasons that I chose to study the cultural revolution in Cuba is because I am a Spanish major. In the Spanish curriculum, students who are majors are required to take at least one variation of SP 335, which can focus on a variety of topics that look into culture, history, and societies in the Spanish-speaking world. The fall semester of my junior year, I took a course with Dr. Bell of the Spanish Department as one of the options for my 335 Spanish requirement. The course was titled Latin American Music: Bodies, Beats, and the Nation. The course addressed the role of music within Latin American nations and societies through the expansion of the concept of music as solely entertainment to the use and creation of music for purposes such as propaganda, activism, social and political commentary, unity, expression of identity, a method of recording history, and appropriation and commodification. In the class, I learned about the history and creation of

musical genres, lyrics, and systems of distribution. We discussed and studied topics ranging from the “recruitment of the gaucho, to nation building projects, to social critique, to drug trafficking” (Bell, 2016) as a manner of better understanding the role of music in Latin America’s social, political, and cultural moments, as these moments are beacons that point toward the creation of certain musical genres. Interestingly enough, relationships can be seen between the historical events/atmospheres and the music of certain time periods. It’s a perfect depiction of the chicken or the egg—which came first? In some cases, it can be difficult to determine if the social atmosphere impacted the music of a nation, or if the music impacted the social atmosphere of the nation. In Spanish 335 with Dr. Bell, we studied gaucho music, *corridos* and *narcocorridos*, national anthems, samba, Cuban son, hip hop, and other genres that are specific to Latin America’s history.

As we worked our way through Latin America, the unit that interested me most was Cuba. During our study of the island nation, we learned about how Celia Cruz was commoditized for the use of the United States as a way to create friendly relations between the U.S. and Latin America. A large part of the motivation for this appropriation was America’s investment in the United Fruit Company. We studied “son,” a style of music that incorporated African and Spanish instruments and influences, and as a result, was prohibited in the early 21st century by the government in order to hide the “blackness” of Cuba. Finally, we addressed the current situation in Cuba, with the influence of hip hop on the cultural revolution from the 1990s to the present. This is the part of the course where I felt most engaged. After decades closed off to the outside world, the younger generation, whose parents experienced the revolution of Castro, are now expressing their discontent at different issues in the country. The island is in a transitional time right now, and as it opens up more, we are able to see and hear more about the

situation in Cuba than was available in past years. The rising generation, made up of the children of those who lived through Castro's revolution, is starting conversations (in my area of study, through music) that their parents and grandparents would never have dared to initiate.

The process of learning about the impact of music in indigenous societies sparked my interest. The people of Cuba, even with their long history of oppression and struggle for freedom, still find ways to cry out against injustices. As someone who is passionate about advocacy and education of the public about such topics, I was excited to learn more about Cuba's cultural revolution and study the music igniting it. When considering what I wanted to do for my honors thesis, I came back to this topic. Because I am a Spanish major, this was a great opportunity to use the language as well as dive more into a specific culture in Latin America. Originally, I met with Dr. Lang and pitched the idea of me creating a playlist of Cuban music that told the social and political history of Cuba. I was really passionate about the idea, and Dr. Lang liked it too and encouraged me to pursue it. And, not only did this project allow me to utilize my Spanish, but it also allowed me to utilize my Communication Studies major. In the Communication Studies department, we learn how to understand the processes of communication and how different forms and methods of communication affect society. I took Pop Culture Communication last year, and in the class we examined and analyzed communication processes and consequences in the media. In my thesis project, I was able to apply the critical analytical skills that I have learned in the Communication Studies Department, through the process filtering through Cuban music and evaluating what role it played or what commentary it provided within the country's history.

Though my time spent in Dr. Bell's class shaped my initial interest in Cuba and its music, my journey within the specific context of my honors thesis began with my meeting with Dr.

Lang. I went into the meeting fearful because I wasn't sure of the response I would receive about my idea, but she provided encouragement and insight that stimulated my thoughts about the direction of my project. After that meeting, I put my honors thesis on a mental shelf for a time. Then, when I received an email from the honors college announcing that there would be a HONR 499 class taught by Jason Powell, I was intrigued. I knew that traditionally, your honors thesis was essentially completely self-motivated, aside from any meetings that you arranged with your advisor. I also know that many people love not having a "class" for HONR 499. Also, even though it is worth three credit hours, many people don't see their thesis as another "course." This was appealing, to have a seemingly "lighter" load my last semester, by not having a class to attend. However, I also recognized that it is detrimental for students to have the mindset that their honors thesis isn't actually a 3 credit hour course, and as a result, not dedicate enough time to it. I was hopeful at the prospect of being able to be a part of Jason's class, where we could flesh out our ideas together, gain direction and momentum, and be held accountable for our work. This, in the end, made joining the class the most wise and appealing option for me.

At the start of the semester, I was still holding onto my original plan and idea for my thesis, that I would create a playlist of Cuban music that told the social and political history of Cuba. Essentially, it would be a timeline. But from the start, Jason helped us all to rethink our ideas and make them more specific. He explained that once we began researching, the amount of information available on our topics would be overwhelming, and in order to ensure that our theses were of appropriate depth, we needed to narrow our idea, and then if necessary, we could alter or expand it again later. In order to make my thesis more specific, I decided that rather than making a playlist that told the entire history of Cuba, meaning I would have to research music from the last 500 years (yikes!), I decided to focus it more by specifically looking at Cuban hip

hop from the 1990s to the present and creating a playlist from the music that provides social commentary on the racism in Cuba.

As I began researching this more, I realized that I actually had narrowed my topic too much, as it was difficult to find sufficient music by a variety of Cuban artists that was specifically hip hop from the 1990s to the present and focused on racism. So once again, I altered my playlist specifications. My playlist still focuses on Cuban hip hop music from the 1990s to the present, but now it has expanded to songs that address a variety of social and political issues, not only racism. The artists on my playlist speak out about or criticize a variety of issues, including racial and cultural identity, women's rights, gender identity, freedom of speech, other forms of oppression, and of course, the original topic, racism. Widening the reach of my thesis allowed me to create a more comprehensive playlist that addresses the current social and political climate in Cuba.

As mentioned earlier, it was an obstacle to create a playlist of Cuban music specifically addressing racism. This is because of the oppressive climate that artists in Cuba face. Resources are limited, and opportunities are few and far in between for artists. The only production studios available to artists are government owned and operated, meaning that what artists are allowed to say in their music and what topics they are allowed to speak on are restricted. The government maintains control through this structure. As a result, there are few artists who are willing to risk punishment by the government for speaking out in their music, and there are even fewer artists who are able to find the resources to produce and disseminate their own music. The number of artists who met the qualifications for my playlist were few because in order to be activists through their music, Cuban artists must 1) be willing to risk their safety for the sake of activism, 2) be willing to accept the risk that they will be less "successful" without the typical methods of

distribution a production company can offer, and 3) have the resources to record and disseminate their music. This was a challenge in the process of creating my playlist, as numbers were low as to what artists I found to include. Because of the restrictions in Cuba, as well as the lack of Internet access, it was also an obstacle to find the music for which I was looking. I could find articles and information speaking about and analyzing the music of activist artists in Cuba, but it was often difficult to find access to the songs online. And those that I could find online, were very limited in what platforms they were available on, meaning I might find one artist's music only on Spotify, another only on Youtube, and even others only on Soundcloud. Consequently, my hope of creating a comprehensive playlist on Spotify so that the playlist could be shared was unattainable. To overcome this obstacle, it was necessary that I create a list of the song titles and the artists, accompanied by the platform on which the song can be found, as the manner of dissemination of my playlist.

As an additional part of my thesis, I wrote an accompanying description of the social and political climate as context for the playlist, as well as descriptions of each of the artists on the playlist and their involvement in activism. My hope for my thesis is that it not only can help educate students and nonstudents alike in the United States on social issues outside of our own country, but that university instructors (or high school instructors) could use this playlist as a resource for their course as a manner of helping their students learn about the social and political issues in Cuba, a country with which the United States has had a long, complex relationship. Not only is there an element of social awareness and activism through the analysis of my playlist, but the aspect of language can be helpful in the classroom too. Through critically listening and analyzing the pieces, students will grow and develop in the Spanish language as well.

Through the process of completing my honors thesis I have grown in my understanding of the social and political struggles occurring in Cuba. This was a topic that I was motivated to learn more about because of my experience in SP 335 with Dr. Bell. I faced difficulties on both the specificity of my thesis, as well as the compilation of my thesis because of the access and distribution of Cuban music. But after a series of modifications and necessary flexibility, I am excited about my final product. I hope my playlist provides a medium through which individuals can expand their social awareness, learn about another country's culture, and even develop in the Spanish language.

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Combating Bigotry with Beats

Cuba is an island with a tumultuous 500 hundred-year history filled with disruption, racism, oppression, and violence. In an environment of systematic oppression since 1898, the people of Cuba have historically used music to express their dissatisfaction, create unity, and to encourage political and social action. My playlists demonstrates and explores the role that Cuban music has played and is playing in social and political conversations on this island.

Artists have been amplifying their voices through hip-hop music in Cuba from the 1990s to the present, and the playlist I have created highlights some of this music. While its parents lived through years of severe oppression following Castro's revolution, the younger generation is making waves in Cuban society, starting controversial conversations in resistance to the long-standing racism and oppression of individual expression. The music on this playlist expresses the voice of the Cuban people in the midst of racial tensions and struggles under Fidel Castro's government, and now the administration of his brother, Raúl.

After the Castro's revolution, many afro-Cubans believed situations were likely to improve for them—after all, Castro claimed to be a man of the people. As an illegitimate child, Fidel grew up with his mother in workers' housing. He spent his childhood days surrounded by more black Cubans than white Cubans. When he came into power in 1959, Castro's revolution "sought to remove barriers for afro-Cubans, but racism didn't disappear; it was relegated to the private spaces" (Fernandes, 2016). Eventually, Castro announced to Cuba, and the international world, that he had solved racism in Cuba—it no longer existed. As part of this colorblindness, afro-Cubans began to lose their cultural consciousness. Cubans were instructed that their race did not matter—only their nationality as Cubans mattered. As a result, any possible outcry against racism was silenced. Afro-Cubans were convinced that their race was not an important part of

their identity. But the reality of the situation spoke otherwise—after the collapse of the Soviet Union created a greater racial divide, economic opportunities in the tourism industry created greater social inequalities as the government hid black Cubans away while putting the white Cubans on display for tourists. It was and is still nearly impossible for a person of color to obtain a job in the tourism industry. This is detrimental to the race-related wealth and employment disparity, because only the tourism industry gives a person access to the American dollar, which is the only currency that really matters in Cuba now (Fernandes, 2016).

After years of oppression, Cubans grew restless under the unrelenting pressure from the government. Along with the economic changes in Cuba during the 1990s came a cultural revolution. Fernandes (2016) says, “Hip-hop artists became the vanguard of the struggle in the 1990s.” As it grew into adulthood, the younger generation became conscious that it was being stripped of its right to expression. Racial identity and cultural heritage, gender, sexual orientation, artistic expression had all been oppressed. The Cuban government claimed to have eradicated racism, so citizens were not allowed to say otherwise. In Castro’s eyes, admitting racism exists would mar Cuba’s international appearance. In the 60s, Castro had banned anything that he saw as a link to the U.S. and its culture. But this younger generation was not willing to accept the established. It found a renewed sense of importance and pride in their cultural and racial identity. “In the early days of the revolution, queer Cubans were relegated to correctional labor camps by the government” (Madrid, 2016). And although conditions have improved for citizens in the last several years, recognition of cultural diversity is still absent from the island.

Music became a way to speak out in resistance and pride against anything perceived as oppressive by the Cuban government or society. Hip-hop became one of the primary tools of this

underground cultural revolution. It is risky to speak out against the government in any manner, but Wilkinson (2015) says “Music often gets a free pass from the government, in part because performers are limited in their ability to disseminate their work. Internet access in Cuba is among the lowest in the hemisphere, available mostly to those with money or privilege.” It is common that the social media and other forms of dissemination are “frequently blocked by state censors.” As a result, the dissemination of Cuban artists’ music is sporadic and random, meaning their music can be hard to obtain through the means we in the United States call “normal.” But while there are government-funded studios and production companies that could greatly increase and improve the dissemination of music, many artists refuse these offers and produce music on their own, allowing them to maintain freedom and agency. Signing on with government-run studios would restrict what they could sing and rap about, removing their rights as activists. But because conditions are not optimal for artists’ success, many of these musical activists have migrated to the United States to continue their work in an environment with more access to resources (Fernandes, 2016; Wilkinson, 2015; Zolov 2011).

Los Aldeanos

In the 1990s, Aldo Roberto Rodríguez Baquero and Brian Oscar Rodríguez Galá created the hip-hop group Los Aldeanos. As leaders of the hip-hop revolution, their music has inspired younger generations to protest for change within the Cuban government. Part of the “underground” rap industry in Cuba, their music has brought them into such conflict with the Cuban government that they recently migrated to the United States in order to continue their work as musicians. Their music is considered antigovernment, but they deny any allegations of antisocialism and they make it clear that they prefer the descriptor “pro-revolutionary.” The pair describes the purpose for their lyrics as a desire for life to be better for their fellow Cubans. The

pair refused opportunities for government sponsorship in order to act and create as independent artists and maintain their agency (White, 2016; *Los Aldeanos*, n.d.; Guy, 2017).

Obsesión

You can say that Alexey Rodriguex and Magia Lopez are the “mother and father” of the Cuban hip-hop scene. The husband and wife duo were among the first stars of the Cuban hip-hop scene, and they have since gained international recognition. The pair speaks through music about love, women’s rights, racism, and afro-Cuban culture. They set the tone for the use of hip-hop as a tool speaking out about social and political issues (Guy, 2017; *Obsesión*, n.d.; Sprague, 2017).

Ibeyi

Daughters of a Cuban music legend, Miguel “Angá” Díaz, Naomi and Lisa-Kanidé Díaz are twin sisters who go back to their cultural roots as the inspiration for their music. The pair are French-Cuban, and have Yoruba ancestors, who were brought to Cuba during the slave trade. They both speak four languages—Spanish, English, French, and Yoruba. They sing in all four languages as well, although they prefer English and Yoruba in their music. Singing in Yoruba, a West African language, “attaches a new flood of emotional, cultural, and historical value to their music” (Mahadevan, 2014). Stylistically, their music incorporates elements of jazz, soul, hip-hop, and electronica. The use of Yoruban and Cuban instruments as well as the implementation of references to Regla de Ocha, the Afro-Cuban religion their family practices, adds to the cultural expression of their music. In an environment that encourages colorblindness, integration, and assimilation of culture, Ibeyi and their music are working to promote the celebration of afro-Cubans’ heritage and ancestral culture (Mahadevan, 2014).

Pauza

Pauza is a female DJ duo who started their partnership in 2012 after they participated in the first-ever Cuban DJ course. Their artistry is a musical mix of techno, house and tech-house, and African rhythms. As the popularity and influence of electronic music grows in Havana, Pauza continues to make an impact as a powerhouse female DJ team in an industry that is ruled by men, especially in Cuba. Pauza does not write their own lyrics, because as DJs they just mix and create music, but their music still makes an impact as a stand for gender equality in a country where sexism is culturally ingrained and relevant (Guy, 2017).

Krudas Cubensi

Krudas Cubensi, also called Las Krudas, formed in 1999 with Odaymara Cuesta, Olivia Prendes, and Odalys Cuesta. The three had been involved in activism throughout the 90s. In 2010, the trio became a duo when Odalys Cuesta left the group. After founding the first vegan and queer activist art group in Cuba, Krudas Cubensi began using music to fight against oppression for the rights of afro-Latina lesbian women. The queer feminist afro-Cuban group has used hip-hop to advance queer rights “in a traditionally patriarchal society” (Madrid, 2016). In 2006 the group migrated to the U.S. to continue their work (Madrid, 2016; *Bio*, n.d.).

Conclusion

Hip-hop has become the fuel for the cultural revolution occurring in Cuba right now. As artists like Los Aldeanos, Obsesión, Ibeyi, Pauza, and Krudas Cubensi continue to speak out against different forms of oppression through their music, the people of Cuba are learning to regain their sense of identity through their race, cultural heritage, gender, and sexual orientation. Historically, the dictatorship in Cuba has not allowed freedom of expression through music, but today’s musical uprising is breaking barriers put up by the government.

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Playlist:

**Because of the limited distribution of Cuban music, artists often times do not have access to typical manners of dissemination. As a result, this playlist could not be compiled on one singular platform.

“Víctimas” – Obsesión (Spotify)

“Negra mía” (Remasterizado) – Obsesión (Spotify)

“Calle g” – Obsesión (Spotify)

“Los pelos” (en vivo con Kalmunity) – Obsesión (Spotify)

“River” – Ibeyi (Spotify)

“No Man Is Big Enough for My Arms” – Ibeyi (Spotify)

“Los Asesinos” – Los Aldeanos (Spotify)

“Ninito Cubano” – Los Aldeanos (Spotify)

“EL Rap es Guerra” – Los Aldeanos (Spotify)

“A Veces Sueno” – Los Aldeanos (Spotify)

“Libertad de Expresión” – Los Aldeanos (Spotify)

“Censurado” – Los Aldeanos (Spotify)

“Victims” – Los Aldeanos (Spotify)

“Todavía” – Krudas Cubensi (Spotify)

“You Are Not Better Than Me” – Krudas Cubensi (Spotify)

“Emigrar” – Krudas Cubensi (Spotify)

“No Me Dejaron” – Krudas Cubensi (Spotify)

“Poderosxs” – Krudas Cubensi (Spotify)

“Son #6” (Original Mix) – Pauza (Soundcloud)

“Hey You!” (Original Mix) – Pauza (Soundcloud)

“La Farufa” (Original Mix) – Pauza (Soundcloud)

“Samba” (Original Mix) – Pauza (Soundcloud)

“Havana Sunset Sessions” – Pauza (Soundcloud)